

# *How Reasserting The 'Imago Dei' Can Transform Our Culture*



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**The truth that human beings are made in the image and likeness of God, the Imago Dei, might be the single most important Christian doctrine in our culture today. That's a bold statement, but I will explain why I'm making it.**

In Genesis 1:27, we find the first mention of the Imago Dei in Scripture: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (ESV).

Most Christians have heard this Bible verse and would affirm that humans are made in the Imago Dei. But many probably haven’t considered what exactly the image of God is.

### **Three Views**

There are several competing views of this, each with varying strengths and weaknesses.

Some Christians affirm that **the Imago Dei is humanity’s capacity for rationality**. The great Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas *wrote* in the Summa that man is “the most perfectly like God according to that in which he can best imitate God in his intellectual nature.” By **his rationality, man contemplates and imitates God, who “understands and loves Himself,”** Aquinas asserts.

**So, our ability to reason and ponder God is what the Imago Dei entails.**

**A second view is that the Imago Dei involves our capacity for relationship, in particular, in the covenantal marital relationship of husband and wife.** The great twentieth-century Christian theologian Karl Barth was a proponent of this view, noticing that God refers to Himself in the plural in Genesis 1:26: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.”

We are made in the image of a Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. **Indeed, God reveals in the human person an inner plurality within Himself, a doctrine Christians call the Trinity.** This relationality, Genesis 1 indicates, is true with humanity as well: “And let them have dominion. ... male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:26-27).

**So, human beings' capacity for relationship, particularly in marriage, is what being made in the Imago Dei means.**

Other Christian theologians advance a dominion view, using a word that appears twice in Genesis 1. Under this view, mankind is made in the image of God in that we exercise dominion over the rest of creation.

Unlike animals, we create societies, construct buildings, build universities, roads, and skyscrapers. We form communities, invent products, manage economies, and conduct business. **In all these ways, mankind exercises the dominion that God gave him over creation. So, the Imago Dei also means our capacity to exercise dominion.**

### **The Crux of the Matter**

But there's a fourth view which sums up all of these. **The Imago Dei can also be defined as human identity.**

Dr. Ryan Peterson, an associate professor of theology at Biola University, advances this identity view in his book [The Imago Dei as Human Identity: A Theological Interpretation](#).

**Humanity "is what it is because it is identified by God as God's image,"** Peterson writes. "The various powers and attributes belonging to humanity follow from God's determination that humanity will be God's image."

In other words, **human beings are the Imago Dei because we are an image of God and we are a representation of Him on the earth. To be human is to be God's image – it is our identity.**

The unique strength of this view is that it then includes all other views – indeed, because **humans truly are an image of God, we then exercise our identity as the image of God through our capacities for rationality, relationships, and dominion.**

Now, the Imago Dei is a uniquely important and critical doctrine for us today. The great Christian philosopher Francis Schaeffer beautifully observed, **“For the [post-modern] man, this phrase, image of God, is as important as anything in Scripture, because men today can no longer answer that crucial question, ‘Who am I?’ ... If anything is a gift of God, this is it – knowing who you are!”**

### **Why Our Society Needs This Now**

Indeed, every single one of our most pressing moral issues today – abortion, euthanasia, same-sex “marriage,” transgenderism, the proliferation of IVF, contraception, the collapse of the family, declining fertility, anti-natalism and environmental extremism, pornography, sex trafficking – **in some way violates, devalues and deforms the image of God in mankind.**

**When a child is killed by abortion, the Imago Dei is violated.**

**When an individual is harmed through transgender drugs, hormones or surgeries, his or her identity as God’s Image is violated.**

**When a child is denied the right to her own mother or father through same-sex marriage, adoption or surrogacy, the Imago Dei is violated** because the child is separated from her parents – who are responsible for and the natural caretakers of her human identity.

**When two men “marry” each other, their identity as God’s Image is violated** because every person is born with a capacity for marital love and family life due to their identity as God’s image.

**When families crumble and collapse, the Imago Dei is violated** because families are the human source and transmission of God’s Image.

In his 1981 apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, Pope John Paul II wrote, **“The fundamental task of the family is to serve life, to actualize in history the original blessing of the Creator – that of transmitting by procreation the divine image from person to person.”**

**That is the beauty, power, and wonder of the Imago Dei – given through the marital union, maintained by families, and restored by the grace of Jesus Christ in each person through His atoning death on the cross.**

Before Christianity came on the scene, human beings were seen as nearly worthless. Human life was not valued. People were expendable.

The idea that human beings have unique value is a Christian ideal rooted in the Imago Dei, and it is one of the reasons Christianity has been so closely aligned with human dignity.

Today, we desperately need all Christian pastors and preachers to fiercely and boldly proclaim the Imago Dei in the fullness of its implications. Yes, all human beings are precious and infinitely valuable in God’s sight because we are made in the image and likeness of God.

By reclaiming the Christian doctrine of the Imago Dei, we defend human dignity and worth in all aspects of our creation – and we defend human identity itself.

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